

2021 RWAf Vets

Autumn Newsletter



Rabbit friendly practice 1

The Receptionist!

Our (RWAf's) current system for assessing rabbit friendliness is to ask a series of open ended questions. We do this for 2 reasons: firstly, so as not to coach answers and to prevent it being a box ticking exercise, telling us what you think we want to know, and secondly, because its genuinely useful to hear what practices are doing, and we can share that information, those tricks and tips, to everyone's benefit. We are going to change that over the next year or 2, by adding in some guidelines and advice. And this is a 2 way flow of information and ideas, feel free to send any thoughts you have in, and we can share them with the vet membership!

This is the first in a series of pieces on rabbit friendliness in the practice, looking at the role of receptionists, who are usually the first person the client sees, and often have to make vital judgements about the urgency of a case.

Obviously I think rabbits are more important than other animals, and should be seen as a priority, but I can justify that statement on the grounds that they, as prey animals, hide disease so well it is very serious by the time it's noticed. Its not just bias! (It also applies to other, similar species, and of course, to birds)



What to do when a client gets in touch?

Elective visits aside, its generally more urgent to see an ill prey animal than a cat or dog, things being equal. A vaguely "off colour" rabbit may be signalling in the only way possible, that it is very ill. Remember that owners don't take rabbits for walks, so the very earliest signs of heart disease, joint disease, or anything else which affects mobility and exercise tolerance are generally missed. Indoor rabbits are usually observed more closely, but outside rabbits' ability and willingness to move around can't be seen unless they are positioned such that they are watched moving about, or not! And rabbits with the space and joie de vivre to bounce and run and binky about are the ones who's subtle problems will be picked up. Those who sit in a hutch will not be.

(As a slight aside, encourage owners to offer a small amount of tasty breakfast first thing. Does the rabbit run enthusiastically to you? Do they eat from your hand? Both good signs of health, I've had rabbits brought in as emergencies due to not wanting breakfast, any delay and they would likely have died.)

Obviously, your practice will have guidelines on how urgent cases are, but I'd suggest that any rabbit not eating, not urinating, breathing badly, with a distended abdomen, unable to get up, bleeding from anything other than a visible wound which can be controlled, or unconscious, should be seen at the earliest possible moment, as an emergency. I'd suggest that the "off colour" rabbit, who is still doing all the things above, can wait till later that day, and only elective procedures should wait until another day.



How to make the waiting area as rabbit-friendly as possible

This usually falls on the reception team to design and implement, and once Christmas is over, there may be a few blank walls to decorate with information...

This gives an opportunity to educate clients or potential clients about rabbits. Owners are usually very happy to provide pictures of their pets, and, with appropriate permission, their stories can be told. Alternatively, purely educational material can be put up. At the RWAf we are happy to provide copies of "Hop to It" to practices. Posters are easily available from Burgess and other food or pharmaceutical companies.

You can be general or focus on specific issues of the time, as with other animal themed messaging. Particularly hot and cold weather, dangers at Christmas, disease peaks in autumn (Myxo), RVHD (winter) and flystrike (late spring to early autumn) are all good focuses, allowing rotation between topics.

What you put up sends a message about how rabbit-friendly the practice is.

The actual layout matters very much too, both in sending a message but in reducing stress and fear for your rabbit (and rodent/bird) clients. Although it may not be possible to completely separate these species from predators, there is still a lot you can do to keep them apart.

If at all possible, separate entrances for prey and predators should open into separate rooms, and be clearly labelled. If separate waiting rooms are not possible, the next best is waiting with rabbits in the car, leading them straight into a spare consult room or similar, or having well separated waiting areas within a large room.

Don't forget, when separating an area, we have to look through the eyes of a rabbit, and consider they're other senses as equally, if not more important than sight. Visual barriers are simple and easily take care of vision. They don't need to be solid, a simple fabric one will do, but that does nothing to mitigate the sounds of cats and dogs, and a barking dog is probably the most stressful thing a rabbit may encounter at the vets.

Separate rooms are the gold standard for separating animals audibly, ideally without shared walls, as well as taking care of the olfactory element. Barriers, unless solid, do little to muffle sound. Airflow may be manipulated to ensure fresh air from outside moves over prey species first before predators.



Remember that scent lingers, unlike the other senses. This can be used to your advantage, by having a period of time at the beginning of the day when rabbits etc are seen, or admitted. But that's not possible in all but the smallest, quietest practices, who might decide to go the whole way and have "rabbit only" days, if and when possible. Otherwise, though, scent lingers and means that future rabbits, seen after a predator, will still pick up the smell. Anything you can do to reduce the smell is helpful. Masking it with other scents, as neutral or at least as not unpleasant, as possible, helps: eg hay, straw and shavings bedding, and the use of Pet Remedy simply as a strong smell might be useful.

Pet Remedy has quite a bit of data behind it as a stress in other species, and this (Unwin et al, 2020) did show some positive effects in rabbits. The new SecureBunny pheromone product is also very promising, and should be available by the time this goes out.

Its difficult to know how effective keeping rabbits higher than other animals makes them feel secure. They aren't arboreal, and if anything, dig deeper to get away from predators. But they do seem to spend a lot of time in vigilance behaviour at home, so may benefit from being able to spot predators, especially if they can hear and smell them, and feel secure high up.

Sarah Louise Unwin, Richard Anthony Saunders, Emily-Jayne Blackwell, Nicola Jane Rooney, A double-blind, placebo-controlled trial investigating the value of Pet Remedy in ameliorating fear of handling of companion rabbits, Journal of Veterinary Behavior, Volume 36, 2020, Pages 54-64, ISSN 1558-7878.